

Islamophobia in Mainstream Canadian Media: “Muslims as Terrorists”

“If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.”

– Malcolm X

What is Islamophobia?

- The unfounded or irrational fear and/or hatred of Islam or Muslims (or people perceived to be Muslim), leading to violence and systemic discrimination.

Why should we investigate Islamophobia?

- Islamophobia (like all racisms) is not just overt, but largely normalized – meaning that Islamophobic attitudes/behaviours are more prevalent than we may realize. For example, 42% of Canadians believe that discrimination against Muslims is “mainly their fault”; and 44% of Ontarians believe that police are at least sometimes justified in profiling or targeting Muslims. This demonstrates how negative conceptualizations of Muslims exist even among those who would not intentionally or actively ‘discriminate’ – but who nonetheless find acceptable, unsurprising and/or legitimate the violence directed against Muslims.
- It is therefore insufficient for us to denounce and distance ourselves from only those forms of hate that are obvious to us and that we are made aware of. Indeed, the most dangerous manifestations of racism are dangerous *because* they are not obvious or widely acknowledged.
- Our failure to recognize this normalized (i.e. not obvious, not widely-acknowledged) racism means that even those of us without intentionally racist motivations are complicit in its perpetuation. As such, we must understand racism in its complexity so that we can combat it meaningfully.
- **Because Islamophobia is maintained through the (implicit/explicit) myths that we tell/are told about Muslims/Islam, we must articulate these myths and deconstruct them.**

MYTH: Muslims as Terrorists

FACT: Islam is not a uniquely or particularly violent religion

- Like the majority of ancient religious doctrines, Islam is *capable* of being interpreted to sanction/promote violence. The Muslim Holy Book (The Qur'an), however, has proportionally fewer violent references than does, for example, the New Testament or the Old Testament
- Approximately 100,000 Muslims in the world – or 0.01% of the global Muslim population – are engaged in violent activities with militant groups.
- In recent history (i.e. the 20th century), Christians have been responsible for over 98% of the global deaths from political violence. This is not intended to condemn Christianity but rather, to demonstrate the capacity for any ideology to be operationalized in ways that serve the socio-political agendas of its adherents.

FACT: Muslims are responsible for a small proportion of 'terrorist' violence in the West

- Canada (1960-2015): Muslims have been responsible for 1% of terrorist-described incidents; and 0.41% of fatalities from terrorism (White supremacists - 4% of terrorist-described incidents; 2.4% of fatalities from terrorism)
- USA (post 9/11-2017): Muslims have been responsible for 0.05% of violent deaths
- Europe 2010-2015: 'Islamists' responsible for less than 2% of 'terrorist' attacks

FACT: Muslims experience more violence/hate than they perpetrate

- In Canada, since 1960, three times as many people have been killed for being Muslim than by a Muslim. In the United States in 2016, an individual was 6 times as likely to be killed for being Muslim than by Muslim 'extremists'.
- In January 2017, Muslims were victimized in the most fatal act of politically/ideologically-motivated violence in Canada since 1989 (six killed in the shooting at Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City)
- There are at least 100 active White Supremacist organizations in Canada -including the Ill'ers, which is illegally lethally armed and 200-members strong but that the RCMP has expressed no interest in investigating
- Hate crimes against Muslims in Canada are increasing even as they are decreasing in general – there were 159 reported in 2015; over the last four years, they have increased by 253%
- In 2016, there were at least 21 attacks on Muslim institutions and/or property
- Anti-Muslim protests in Canada are commonplace, including outside of mosques and high schools

FACT: The majority of global violence is committed by the West, at the state level

- The 3,000 killed in the September 11, 2001 attack on the US Twin Towers has since justified a 'War on Terror' that has killed between 1.3 and 2 million.
- In comparison, since 2000, there have been approximately 195,000 deaths from 'terrorism' (perpetrated by Muslims and non-Muslims) globally

How does the mainstream media contribute to Islamophobia?

- Our news media does not simply *describe* reality, but rather, *curates* the presentation of reality that it serves to its consumers.
- Indeed, at any given time in the world, there are an infinite number of occurrences. We depend upon our media to select and present global happenings consistently and representatively, so that we can make accurate assessments about the state of our communities, our country, and the world.
- Islamophobic narratives (and other biases) interrupt the fairness of media representation. For example, a [2017 study from the University of Georgia](#) found that “attacks by Muslim perpetrators [in the United States] received, on average, 449% more coverage [in American media] than other attacks.” This shows how Islamophobic ideas shape media coverage, resulting in a skewed representation – in this case, by suggesting that Muslim violence is more prevalent than it really is.
- It is essential to investigate the media as a forum of Islamophobia for two reasons.
 - Firstly, the media is a *symptom* of Islamophobia - as media coverage reflects the existing social biases that inform our attitudes, including those of the journalists/corporations who produce it.
 - Secondly, the media *circulates* and *exacerbates* Islamophobia, in that biased media curation of reality validates Islamophobic biases among those who consume it.

How does this information sheet work?

- This analysis shows side-by-side comparisons of mainstream Canadian media coverage in response to different violent episodes – specifically, those in which Muslims were the perpetrators and those in which Muslims were the victims.
- The disparities in coverage are attributable to Islamophobia – i.e. the social construction of Muslims as a particularly violent threat to society, and the relative lack of value accorded to Muslim lives.
- The analysis is limited to mainstream media outlets rather than those regarded as ‘right wing’ (eg. Sun News, Rebel Media), in order to demonstrate how Islamophobic ideologies:
 - do not exist only on the fringes but rather, even in those media sources without an explicit political position.
 - are accessed by a majority of the population (e.g. the millions who collectively consume the Globe & Mail, Toronto Star, and CBC radio/television/online)

Visibility/Nature of Coverage

EG) Muslim-perpetrated act of violence

EG) Islamophobic violence



April 16, 2013: Front page of the Globe & Mail the day after the deadly bombing at the Boston Marathon, in which three were killed.



January 30, 2017: Front page of the Globe & Mail the day after the deadly shooting at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City, in which six were killed.

Disparity

Unlike the Boston Marathon Bombing, which was the front-page feature in the Globe and Mail the day after it happened, the Quebec mosque shooting received only side-page coverage - even though it happened in Canada, resulted in twice as many casualties, and was the most deadly act of political/ideological violence in Canada since 1989. The headline for the Boston event - "Terror in Boston" - is clearly meant to elicit fear and a sense of collective danger; as compared to the less evocative and vague "Several dead after mosque shooting in Quebec City".

The historian Howard Zinn has reflected on the effect of such coverage – i.e. that which offers only casual acknowledgement of an event – in shaping our understandings: "*Outright lying or quiet omission takes the risk of discovery which, when made, might arouse the reader to rebel against the writer. To state the facts.... and then to bury them in a mass of other information is to say to the reader with a certain infectious calm, yes, mass murder took place, but it's not important--it should weigh very little in our final judgments; it should affect very little what we do in the world.*". Put otherwise – the disparity in media treatment of these events reflects and reproduces ideas about whose violent behaviour, and whose victimization, should be considered relevant to us as Canadians. Indeed, the victimized Quebec mosque was, several months after the incident, voted down in a referendum to build a cemetery on a nearby plot of land – a result that would have been inconceivable had the attack been accorded the sombre significance that similar incidents targeting non-Muslims have received.

Extent of Coverage

EG) Muslim-perpetrated act of violence

Total # of hits for search terms related to the Boston Marathon bombing on Canadian mainstream media websites (CBC.ca, globeandmail.com, torontostar.ca):

768

EG) Islamophobic violence

Total # of hits for search terms related to the Islamic Cultural Centre shooting on Canadian mainstream media websites (CBC.ca, globeandmail.com, torontostar.ca) :

194

Disparity

There are approximately four times as many articles in online Canadian media about the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing as there are about the 2017 Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City shooting despite the fact that, as mentioned above, the latter both happened within Canada and was more fatal.

As mentioned above, in both Canada and the United States, a person is more likely to be killed for *being* Muslim than *by* a Muslim. The disproportionately high level of attention given to acts of violence committed by Muslims versus the disproportionately low level of attention given to acts of violence committed against Muslims obscures this reality, suggesting, in fact, the reverse to be true.

The pervasiveness of this logic means that even while Muslims are at greater risk of violence, this risk is not appropriately accounted for among those institutions responsible for our safety and security, rendering Muslims overpoliced and underprotected (while 59% of the lone wolf 'terror' attacks in Canada between 1990 and 2014 were committed by White supremacists, the CSIS website claims that right-wing extremism "not been a significant a problem in Canada in recent years" and that Islamist 'terrorism' represents "the most prominent threat to Canadian interests and our national security").

Contextualization of Violence

EG) Muslim-perpetrated acts of violence



Friday May 26, 2017: Description for CBC Radio's Ontario Today Show, reading "Why the terrorist attacks are on your mind. 28 Coptic Christians in Egypt are dead after gunmen opened fire on a bus, just days after a suicide bomber killed 22 in Manchester, England"

EG) Islamophobic act of violence

June 23, 2017: Security Expert on CBC Television after a van intentionally plowed into Finsbury Mosque Park in England, killing one and injuring 8: "an attack like that is unlikely to happen here [in Canada]"

Disparity

Acts of violence committed by Muslims are over-connected (the attacks in [England](#) and [Egypt](#) have nothing in common except that they were committed by Muslims); and given excessive attention (the CBC radio show failed to include in its debrief on global violence any mention of a [US air strike in Syria that same week – which, with 106 casualties, was more deadly than the two other attacks combined](#)). This exaggerates the incidence and threat of Muslim-perpetrated violence while also minimizing other, more significant (i.e. more systemic and deadly) incidents of violence.

Conversely, episodes of Islamophobic violence are rarely considered within the broader context of anti-Muslim hate – making it possible for this security expert to suggest that an Islamophobic attack is unlikely to happen in Canada, even though one *already had* happened that same year (and with [6 casualties](#), it was the [largest act of politically/ideologically-motivated violence in Canada since 1989](#)). There is no reason to discount the threat of this happening again, given that there are [100+ active White Supremacist groups in Canada](#) (including those that are [armed and admittedly willing to use violence](#)); and that Muslim people/properties are [regularly targeted in violent hate crimes](#) in this country (one particularly egregious example - the Imam of the Quebec mosque victimized in the January shooting had his [car set on fire only 8 months later](#)).

Explanation for Violence

EG) Muslim-perpetrated act of violence



May 24, 2017: CBC.ca's description of the perpetrator of the Manchester Arena attack

EG) Islamophobic violence



June 20, 2017: CBC.ca's description of the perpetrator of the Finsbury Park Mosque attack

Disparity

Muslim perpetrators of violence are generally depicted as calculating members of global Islamist movements, who are motivated by the desire to advance their political agendas. This is the case even when alternative explanations for the violence exist (eg. The [2013 Boston Marathon bombers owned White supremacist literature](#), but this was not widely reported on; [Salman Abedi had a history of drug use and difficulty in school](#), but this was understood as being incidental rather than central to a trajectory that culminated in his attack at the Manchester Arena). Further, there is rarely any historical/political context given to this 'terrorist' violence – such as the [1.3-2 million killed in the War on Terror](#), which is often cited by Muslim 'terrorists' as the motivation for their violence (indeed, experts have always [warned of such a violent blowback from the prolonged and indiscriminate War on Terror](#)).

Such reporting mis-oriens media consumers in several ways:

1. It leads them to assume that Muslim 'terrorism' is attributable to an irrational hatred/bloodlust inspired by problematic Islamic ideology. This imposes collective guilt and casts suspicion on all Muslims for individual acts of violence, by suggesting that violent individuals are produced as such by their faith/Muslim communities. The frequent calls for Muslims to apologize for the violence committed by their co-religionists – an expectation not imposed on other groups of people – is a reflection of such mass application of guilt.
2. The failure to mention/accord significance to War on Terror casualties leads to a failure to recognize the primary sources of violence in our world (i.e. the West, at the level of the state) and its victims (i.e. non-Westerners) – and hence, how Canadians can engage meaningfully to address violence at home and abroad.

By contrast, acts of violence committed against Muslims are individualized and relegated to the fringes (i.e. understood as the product of 'mental illness') rather than contextualized within the broader Islamophobic/racist climate in which they emerge (eg. the media gave little attention to the fact that [White supremacist groups celebrated the Finsbury Park mosque attack](#)). This minimizes the extent and systemic nature of Islamophobia, and the threat of similar future incidents. Further, media often takes a 'victim-blaming' approach to understanding Islamophobic violence, by suggesting that Muslims 'invite' such violence as a result of their own anti-social behaviours (eg. [news reports after the Finsbury Park Mosque Attack focused on the mosque's association with 'extremist ideology', implying that this contributed to its being targeted](#)); and warning that Islamophobic violence will be galvanized perversely to motivate Muslim 'terrorism' (eg. after the Finsbury Park Mosque Attack, CBC's Adrienne Arseneault speculated that ISIS would use it as a recruitment tactic). This wrongly re-centres Muslim-perpetrated violence as *the* violence in our world, and dismisses the victimization of Muslims as a mere by-product.

What can we do?

Consume media critically

- Ask yourself the following questions about news coverage of any event:
 - CONTENT: Is this the only incident of this nature to be happening – and if not, why am I hearing about this one and not another? (consider, for example, that there is a [mass shooting in the United States almost every day](#) and that we do not hear about most)
 - CONTEXT: Am I being given the historical and political context in which this incident has taken place? If so, is this context complete? Am I being given statistics and facts in order to situate this incident within the broader reality?
 - STYLE: Is the coverage of this incident intended to evoke an emotional response (i.e. sadness, anger, fear, joy etc.)? Does this emotional response cause me to deviate from my logical response? If the actors in the incident had been different (i.e. by race, ability, sexual orientation, gender expression etc.), can I imagine the coverage being different?
 - BIAS: Might the conveyor have an interest in presenting a particular narrative? Is this narrative fair/accurate?
 - OVERALL: How is this information contributing to my worldview? Recognizing that racism, misogyny, transphobia, homophobia, ableism and other systems of differentiation/hierarchization are reproduced through the media, is this coverage *disrupting* or *confirming* the biases that maintain these?

Consume critical/analysis-oriented media

- The gaps in context/content from our mainstream media can be corrected for by consuming as wide a variety of media sources as possible. Some media sources that provide a critical analytical perspective are:

[The Real News](#)
[The Intercept](#)
[Al Jazeera](#)

[Democracy Now!](#)
[Rabble](#)

[The Guardian](#)
[The Independent](#)

Support critical media

- Financially - Because this media is generally independent from corporate/government interests, it is both more likely to provide critical analysis *and* to require financial support to sustain itself
- Publicly – Thanks to social media, we have unprecedented power to consume and spread information. Share insightful and critical media pieces among your networks, to support others in accessing a more complete/fair worldview. While we often underestimate the value of sharing knowledge and education in our personal circles, injustice is reproduced at the level of discourse – meaning that intervening to correct/nuance problematic and/or simplistic understandings is critical towards addressing injustice.

Speak out against media misrepresentation

- Recognizing that media does not just *report* on reality but *influences* reality, registering our discontent with biased media coverage/analysis is crucial. To do so:

CBC Television/Radio/Online: ombudsman@cbc.ca
Globe & Mail: letters@globeandmail.com
CTV Television: programming@ctv.ca

Toronto Star: lettertoed@thestar.ca
National Post: letters@nationalpost.com